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Catholic Schools and the Immigrant Community: A Look Backward and Forward

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Michael Collins, F.S.C., Ed.D. is a member of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, or Christian Brothers. He currently serves as the president of his alma mater, DeLa Salle High School, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In 2007 Br. Collins received the National Catholic Educational Association Sr. Catherine McNamee Award for outstanding leadership in diversity. What follows is Br. Collins's address to attendees at the first Catholic Higher Education Collaborative conference (CHEC), held at Loyola Marymount University (LMU) in January 2009. In his address, Br. Collins recounts instances of racism and prejudice in his years as a student and later teacher and administrator in Catholic schools. He expands the notion of immigrant to include those brought to this country by force. He maintains that Catholic educators have an obligation to welcome and assimilate those who find themselves in a new place regardless of circumstance.

My name is Michael Collins and I am a DeLa Salle Christian Brother from the Midwest. I would like to point out to all of you how glad I am to be here with you. It is encouraging for me to spend time with people who value what I have valued all my lifetime. Equally important to me is the fact that I know so many of you from different paths of my life, all of which were in the arena of Catholic education. And that to me has been a blessing.

Last night at dinner, Fr. Privett spoke to the topic of a Catholic perspective of immigration. I was reminded of the significance of the term immigrants, and how it is truly multifaceted. One of the points that was made is the fact that the majority had a desire to be here in the United States. Yet, we must admit that there are individuals, millions, in fact, who found themselves in this country as victims of other people's desires. But whatever the circumstance that brought people here, the reality is that they are here among us today, and now we are obligated to respond to the needs of all those individuals. After listening to Fr. Privett's comments last night I wrestled with the question—who are immigrants? Clearly the meaning of an immigrant has different significance depending on the individual. Thus, I have settled with a definition

that I can be comfortable with and it is with that meaning in mind that I intend to speak to you today: Let us agree that whether people desire to be here, or whether they were victims of someone else's desires, they are, nonetheless, among us today, and their inclusion in our schools has been only partially met. Let us also agree that an immigrant is someone who finds himself or herself in a place they have never been before. Let us, further, also agree that we have an obligation to welcome and assimilate them into a new reality that mutually benefits everyone and celebrates the beauty of every culture.

Admittedly, the title of this week's conference, "Catholic Schools and the Immigrant Church: Lessons from the Past and a Bridge to the Future," indeed has different meanings. The people about whom Fr. Privett spoke last night [those who come to this country willingly] are surely eligible for this definition, but they are not alone.

In order to begin to understand and tackle the issue of immigrants in education we must take a step back and explore the concept of immigration through its historical context—at least through the timeline of Catholic education. We need to first understand that when Mother Seton and other women and men founded Catholic schools in the United States they were established for European immigrant children. It was a time when diversity was at its beginning state but a whole group of people had already been calling this land, America, home: [Africans brought to this country as slaves]. In fact those immigrants first arrived in 1680 and they continued to arrive in slave ships until 1889. We can call them immigrants, or whatever definition best suits us.

The fact is that when Catholic schools began, there were millions of people of color already here, but they did not factor in with the others that would come along. This is part of the challenge I believe that we face today. How do we find a place, finally for people who have not historically been in our schools? That is exactly the question that the colleges and universities are currently asking themselves. And I think that this is the question that Catholic elementary and secondary schools have been wrestling with to a greater or lesser degree for more than a century.

I am a product of Catholic schools. As a person of color, I must have been one of the earliest of immigrants. When I was 5 years old, which was about 65 years ago, I went to kindergarten at the Ascension school, which shaped much of my life. But my experience as an immigrant in Catholic schools is very different from the vast majority of you who are here today. Thus, I want to take you on a little trip down my memory lane in order to paint a much broader picture about the experience and impact of the immigrant.

My time at the Ascension school was a fine time and it was a good time. My mother, a woman who valued Catholic education, walked me to school on

the first day, and then she let me freely walk down the street by myself. She would say, "Now you can walk yourself straight down the street, and look both ways before crossing." I was only 5 years old and I look back at that time with new understanding. I think that the message my mother was sending was that I needed to pursue my own education. Nowadays, however, no mother in her right mind would send a 5-year-old five or six blocks on his own.

The one thing I remember the most about kindergarten is that the big event of the year was the square dance and all of us little kids practiced and practiced so that we could prepare this program for our parents. I was designated the caller and I thought it was wonderful that I got to be the caller; it was only later that I determined that it might have created some problems if I was dancing with one of the girls in my class. So it required the Ascension to adapt or make some sort of accommodation.

I later went from my time in grade school to middle school. Back in seventh grade I vividly remember the day when Sr. Virginia, my teacher, came in out of the rain, shook off her umbrella, and announced to the class that it "was raining pitchforks and nigger babies." That comment stunned me, but I did not say anything. Of course, it was a part of the experience, and so, I tried to write it off. I suspected that Sr. Virginia had no idea that what she said might be offensive to me, but I was certain that it was not the first time she had used that expression, although it was the first time I heard it.

During my sophomore year at the school I now lead, a group of my friends from a neighboring parish choir suggested that I join their choir; afterwards we would go to Betty Lue's house and play 45's and dance to Chubby Checker. Well, I could dance. That's a given, right? So, I agreed and joined the choir and everything was fine. The practices were great and Chubby Checker was enjoyable. Finally, we had our first Mass, and, as was the custom, the choir went down together to receive Communion. Later that day I was told by the assistant pastor that the pastor suggested that I worship in my own community. I was dismissed from St. Anne's Youth Choir because they did not want me there. In my mind I told myself that there was no need for me to be in that group, so it was okay for them to have dismissed me. I was protecting myself, of course, from the pain of being different and set apart because of my skin color. Later in life, as I looked back, I thought to myself that it was ironic that Fr. Eickinger (I still remember his name) preached the Gospel everyday; yet he never learned the true meaning of loving your neighbor, and all the other inclusive concepts in Scripture.

During my junior year, Br. Leonard wrote a musical: *Captain from Kaintuck*. I thought that was interesting, so I auditioned for it. I even thought I might get the leading role of the captain, because I could sing. But I did

not get that role. I, instead, got the role of André. If you remember the Elvis Presley movies, there was a little dialogue, and then he sang a song, and then there was another bit of dialogue, and he sang another song. I was a kind of early Elvis Presley. I came on stage and said something like, “Oui, oui mon Colonel,” and then I began to sing the song *I’ve Got Plenty of Nothing*. Looking back at the time it might have even been autobiographical, but I do not think that was really the intention. So after singing *I’ve Got Plenty of Nothing*, people went crazy because I could sing. And because the encore had already been written, I sang *Ol’ Man River*, then I left the stage. That particular scene was my inclusion in the high school musical. I was not the captain, I was not the lieutenant, I was not even a sergeant, I was André, and I guess he worked on the barges; I do not know what he did but I was the only one to get a standing ovation because of my musical skills. Imagine that!

After graduation I entered the Christian Brothers and I joined 30 White novices; and so once again it was a first for me within the Church. Things went rather well until I was appointed to sing the role of the cantor for night prayer. (Some of you are familiar with how this part of the Church works. Compline was the office at the end of the day and we were still doing Latin in those days.) I was really excited about my role as the cantor. Thus, when my time came and I walked out to the center of the aisle, I bowed profoundly, and I intoned “*Jube domne benedicere.*” I thought, “Hey, you know it was not that bad.” Well, it was that bad for my novice master, because I was called in after Compline and was told that I had made a spectacle of myself, that I had tried to draw attention to myself by the way I sang, and I was never going to cantor again. Now in processing this I realized that what had happened was that I sang like a Black kid. I was not White enough, and so it forced me to listen to how the other novices sang—with no style. So, I adapted because I wanted to fit in. I was trying to avoid—by all means—to be seen as being more different than I already was, and so you might say I “Whitened up” my music.

This is often how people of color are forced to accommodate and become absorbed in the new culture in which they find themselves. These immigrants in a new land are often not allowed to bring in what they have and express who they are. A classic story in this regard is what happened to the Native Americans. Suits were put on them, their hair was cut, and the rest of the story is well known by all of us. I wanted to fit in, and so in fitting in I surrendered some of what I was, but not who I was.

In my first teaching assignment I survived, and obviously you will be pleased to know that by that time I was a classical music student; I was in charge of music and I appointed myself cantor and I sang anywhere and anyway I pleased, because I was in charge. My first teaching assignment, by the

way, was back at the very high school from which I had graduated, and ironically enough I went on to eventually become president.

It was a wonderful time in my life. I do not even have stories to share with you that speak to how I might have felt like an immigrant in a new land, because I had already been there. I was the immigrant and my school was the land. The older Christian Brothers that were still around were still a bit critical of my role. In their minds I had never grown up, but that can happen to anyone and I cannot suggest that it was anything other than that.

At the age of 29 (this was still during the appointment days) I was appointed principal of Shanley High School in North Dakota. Shortly after my appointment, I was invited to dinner so that I could be introduced to the school community. It was a wonderful evening. Toward the end of the evening, however, the lights came up and I was introduced to the good people as the new principal. There was a wave of silence as people actually saw the color of my skin. For a few seconds I thought I would hear the words of Sr. Virginia echo in the crowd, or perhaps lines from *Blazing Saddles*. Eventually petitions to rescind my appointment began to circulate. The bishop of Fargo summoned the good people who were circulating the petition and he told them to either drop their effort or their children would no longer be welcome in the schools of the diocese. And they did.

I spent 10 happy years there, and when I left they gave me a new Audi GTI Silver Fox, the limited edition. Now you might also say that they made sure I had adequate transportation to get out of town; but I like to look at it as a gesture of appreciation for 10 years of service. It was an interesting time.

This was in 1967; Martin Luther King, Jr. as well as Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated around the time of my first year. Days later, a group of sisters came to me saddened by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. They were there to commiserate with me and to offer their sympathies. I reminded them that Martin Luther King was an American hero, not just mine. "Oh! But we have to do something," they said. "We would like to establish a scholarship for a Black boy from Chicago to come to our school free of charge." And I was reminded of the line from *Oliver*, "One boy... boy for sale..." How do you do that? What do you do? Do you go to the south side of Chicago, rent a vehicle, and get one of those loudspeakers calling for a Black boy to come to Fargo, North Dakota, of all places? Free of charge?

The sisters meant well, but they missed the point. I told them that they had their own "Negroes," their own colored people, and they were the Native Americans. I suggested that if they wanted to really extend themselves to people of color, why not set up a program like the foreign exchange program model? And why not find a family that would take in a Native American kid,

and allow that kid to experience our school community? These children, after all, were people in their own backyard. It is very romantic to talk about offering scholarships to Black kids from Chicago, but what happens to the Black kid in Chicago when he finds himself or herself in Fargo, North Dakota? What happened to me! It would be the same reaction as the day I was introduced as principal, only this time the child would be without any real protection.

I also remember Tillie Savageau, who had 10 kids at our school, who stopped at school to see me one day. He said, "Br. Mike, I was driving by and I thought, 'I haven't seen Br. Mike in a coon's age.' So I thought I would stop in and visit." I found the word "coon" a bit offensive. But I understood that he meant nothing by it. It was the culture. Again, I found myself facing a new reality.

In 1977 I left Fargo to attend the University of San Francisco on a Bush Foundation grant to study for my doctorate. During that time I became principal at St. Mary's College High School in Berkeley. And, needless to say, there was some culture shock between Fargo, North Dakota, and Berkeley, California. It was a good culture shock, but it was a culture shock, nonetheless.

Early on, I observed that young men would come to class wearing hats and caps with "boom" boxes on their shoulders. So, I innocently said to one of the brothers: "Br. Brian, I don't get this." And he said, "Well, Michael, you need to understand that this is cultural." Imagine, a White brother explaining to a Black brother that these Black boys were expressing their cultural side. Consequently, St. Mary tolerated some of the inappropriate behavior of the Black guys that they would not accept from the White guys, not realizing that this was creating division in the school. I explained to them that what was truly cultural was that a disproportionate number of those Black guys lived in single-parent families, where their mothers were working hard to create a better life for their sons than they had. I defied them to name a teller at the Bank of America who set aside his boom box to take care of business. The fact was that we were "ripping off" those women and those parents who were working so hard to better their sons' experience by letting them simply get by.

When I became principal I became a "countercultural principal." I will not get into all of the cultural changes, but let me say, for example, that I dropped the Black Student Union at St. Mary's High School, which created quite a furor among the adult Black people, but not among the students, interestingly. Let me say, though, that there are circumstances when that kind of organization may be appropriate, and it can bring together that sense of community among a few that we should all be trying to create among all the members of our schools regardless of their color.

Well, now I am back at DeLa Salle High School again. Mikey is back, and when I attended the school I was the Black guy; when I returned to the school 37% of the student population was of color, half the families received financial aid, 35% were students of other faiths. Nationally, in 2008, the student of color population in Catholic schools was 29%; the students of other faiths comprised 14% of the population.

I use those words students of other faiths deliberately. I cringe at describing people as non-Catholic, because, to me it connotes a secondary kind of membership in a community. I think here in Los Angeles, moreover, people have learned that the word *minority* does not describe anymore what it used to describe, because the White people are rapidly becoming the minority. So I say people of color. It works for me.

But my school is something of a laboratory for much of what I have learned and much of what I have experienced. I think that the challenge that Catholic schools have is to welcome diversity as we welcome new members. The challenge is significant. I think of what we are about and I ask the question: How do we become welcoming to them? How do we truly make them part of the culture that they moved into, and hopefully, help to transform it into a very different one that is representative of the good things represented by all of them together?

I will tell you a story about when I first got there. I looked down on the theatre and I heard music—they were rehearsing for the *Music Man*. All the cast members were White, all the stage help was White, the crew was White, the musicians were White. This at a school that's nearly 40% people of color. I took the director aside and told him I was not sure River City, Iowa, looked that way. Well, wrong! It does. It was not a good example. I remember when [now president] Obama got a great boost because he won the primary in one of the Whitest states in the country. So here I was trying to make a point by saying, I do not think the city looks like that. I went on before he dared contradict me, and he got the message. He said, "I really wish more kids of color would come out for the musical." And we were back to this notion of welcoming people. So, I said,

If a 6'7", 240-pound Black kid transfers to DeLa Salle tomorrow, how many coaches would be running to chapel to pray and wish that the kid might consider playing football or basketball? On the contrary, they would be all over the kid. They wouldn't wait for the kid to process this. They would invite him; they would probably even do more than invite him—they might even twist his arm. They would be persistent.

My point, of course, was that we should be no less persistent in this kind of situation at DeLa Salle High School. For, if groups never see in the programs that we offer anyone who looks like them, why should they feel welcome in that activity?

The music director did what I suggested and the following year we produced *Cinderella*, and Prince Charming was Black and Cinderella was blonde. No one batted an eye. A far cry if you remember the *Captain from Kaintuck* mentioned earlier. Making that intervention, by putting yourself in the place of different members, works both ways.

I have made those kinds of inroads and I have raised people's consciousness about how important it is to involve and make everyone part of our diverse community. But just a few years ago, I observed that every kid who was playing a role in our opening liturgy was White. So I met with the campus ministers and asked them to explain why this happened. I heard excuses like: "Well, you know, lots of those Black kids aren't Catholic." So, I asked, "Does it take Catholic hands to carry a cross? Does it take Catholic lips to do the readings?" They replied, "We did ask a group of Black kids if they would take up the offering." To which I responded, "When did you ask them?" "Right before the liturgy," they answered. Of course, at that point students are going to have all sorts of peer pressure. It is important to make young people feel what they are doing is important. This requires remote preparation, not right before. This is an ongoing challenge, even in a school like ours that is the most diverse private high school in the state of Minnesota. It is never over though. It is never over.

A few years ago it became clear to me that the Black kids in our school were underrepresented in the National Honor Society, so I appointed a commission of teachers to strategize how they could identify, encourage, and promote kids of color who were just on the cusp of being eligible academically. This is basically why we call it school.

I have skipped entirely my time at the school where I was principal prior to DeLa Salle. It was a merger of a sister school and a brother school. I soon discovered that the politics of merger can really be difficult. I also learned that for more than a century the tradition at the brother school was that not one Black kid had ever made varsity-level basketball. Never! Basketball—we are not talking lacrosse here, we are talking basketball. I asked one of the coaches why this happens. His response: "Oh, you know, they [Black kids] don't respond well to control ball." Because all should be welcome, I made steps to change the complexion of our varsity basketball team. And today, most take the present reality for granted, which is okay, but I know and that is enough.

I am just going to give a couple of DeLa Salle examples and move on to recommendations. I want to cite one that speaks to the importance of responding to difference, since that is what we are talking about. But I think it is so important for students in Catholic schools to be sensitive to the fact that their responsibility to others should be inclusive. Let me tell you a story: I was working in my office and studying. God probably made me go that particular night, and I heard music so I looked down to a venue where we have dances, but I did not remember that we were going to have a dance. When I looked down I saw a group of kids in wheelchairs “dancing” with DeLa Salle kids, and they were having the time of their lives. This soon blossomed into what we now call the Starry Night Prom. Last year we had 800 guests. It is hosted by 200 of our students who go through an orientation with professionals who deal with teens who have physical or mental disabilities. This is necessary so that our students understand how to respond to an entirely different group. My point is that diversity is not over when Black and White kids get together; the concept and theory of diversity is much broader than color and race. So, we have to put our students in touch with different differences. The prom has a shop where women can choose a gown only slightly worn, where for \$10 boys can get a tux. It works for them. We have kids making corsages and boutonnières. We hire a DJ. We get food from various restaurants so that they have a meal. They have the time of their lives.

I still have a picture in my mind of the grand march. The grand march at prom is typically a couples event. They walk down an aisle and all the people applaud. I still have a vision of a young girl with Down’s Syndrome who did the grand march six times. She would go through and people would clap and she would go around again and join the line; she would go through again and people would applaud—she was making up for an experience she never had. She never had this experience. We created it and our kids took ownership for it. When talking about diversity we have to realize that we are never done. When Black and White people get together and have a good time and respect one another, they should understand that there are all kinds of differences that people bring. We should be preparing our students to honor, to celebrate, to reach out, to understand that.

Let me get to the last part. As I said, there are several stories that I could tell. We have a men’s reading competition, for example. We have created a contest where they are fighting with one another to interpret the meaning of a book. Everyone comes to the book with different preconceived notions and interprets the book through their lens of experience. We also have professional women who lunch with our female students and talk about their careers, talk about how they got where they are and how to interview for

different kinds of jobs. I could go on and on. First, we need to get them there and then we need to expand their horizons. So for those colleges and universities that are seeking to comprehend and to interact with diversity in their schools, I would say it is rather simple. I think the colleges and universities have many fine ways to welcome more people of color from within this country or from whatever part of the world they come. They simply have to find ways to do that better. In 2006, 50,000 Black males received bachelor degrees in the United States, and at the same time 500,000 Black males between the ages of 19 and 24 were incarcerated. If that does not scream out to those of us who say we want to make a difference in the lives of immigrants, particularly those that have been here for 300 years, I do not know what will. I do not know how many ways I can emphasize that one of the best ways that colleges and universities can collaborate with K-12 Catholic schools is to work with those of us who are trying to follow the Gospel message to teach all nations.

I spoke to someone recently about the ACE [Alliance for Catholic Education] program at the University of Notre Dame. I remarked that I think that is a great program, but I wondered to what extent working with or preparing people of color to be part of that experience with young people of color would give them greater hope? He basically said, "You know, we would truly like to have more undergraduates of color." And I believed him. I believe him. But I could not resist saying to him that I have seen the University of Notre Dame football team and there does not seem to be any lack of color on their football team. Finally, I reminded him that where your heart is, that is where your treasure will be. It is all connected.

Let me tell you about a little college in Northern Minnesota few have ever heard of: St. Scholastica. St. Scholastica has an endowment of \$21 million. The president of St. Scholastica came to see me about 4 years ago informing me that they wanted to do a better job with diversity. They said they were going to give a "free ride" annually to five students of color from my high school. I thought to myself, "Well, good luck if you can find some." We now have 17 alumni from DeLa Salle who are enrolled at St. Scholastica, all kids of color, and they are thriving there. Where is your heart, where is your treasure, where is your talk, and where is your walk? I know there are many colleges and universities that are doing a great job. I hear wonderful things, for example, about Boston College and their success in recruiting people of color. But I live in a part of the country where we have Catholic universities that have only two or three players of color even on their varsity football teams. The need goes far beyond that. Additionally, what our schools need, for example, is a curriculum that is bias-free. We need to find ways

to include in the learning experience of all of our students the contribution of women and men of every color. I would never have just a Black history class or a Black literature class in my school. I feel the curriculum should be integrated in a way that everyone receives knowledge through a curriculum that represents everyone.

I am convinced that we do not have in our traditional learning experience enough emphasis put on how various people see and think from different perspectives because our history was written by the people in power. The West was not won for everybody, after all. W. E. B. DuBois, one of the early founders of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], wrote

How easy it is by emphasis or omission to make a child believe that every great soul that the world ever saw was a white man's soul. That every great thought the world ever knew was a white man's thought; that every great deed was a white man's deed.

How many of us have ever heard of the good ship *Clotilde*? I had not heard about it. We know the *Mayflower*, we know the *Nina* and the *Santa Maria*, but the *Clotilde* was the last recorded slave ship to land in America in 1859 in Alabama. Who knew? I did not. But I found out in preparation for this conference. This illustrates what I mean.

Let me also suggest that colleges and universities can find new ways to prepare people of color for leadership in Catholic schools. We have to do a better job. How can we expect that we are going to make young people believe that there is a future for them if they do not experience the future in other people of color who work with them? Catholic schools, in general, need help with that. We need help with the preparation of people of color not only as teachers, but as leaders. This is so important to us. It is so important to the Church.

There are still many challenges. These are some of them. I have talked too long and now I am going to stop, but I should mention that I remember a talk Senator [Joseph] Lieberman gave at an event in Washington when I was associated with the National Catholic Educational Association. He began by saying that he was giving a talk recently and in the middle of it someone got up and walked out. He was really distracted and so he said, "Pardon me, sir, I have not finished." The person responded, "Well, I've got to go get a haircut." "But why didn't you get a haircut before my talk" he asked. The man replied, "I didn't need one then." In order to avoid the senator's dilemma, that is all I have to say today.